

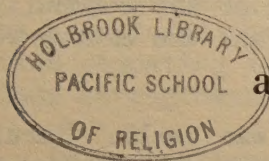
"To promote Christian ideals for agriculture and rural life; to interpret the spiritual and religious values which inhere in the processes of agriculture and the relationships of rural life; to magnify and dignify the rural church; to provide a means of fellowship and cooperation among rural agencies: *Toward a Christian Rural Civilization.*"

The Christian Rural Fellowship Bulletin

Published by The Christian Rural Fellowship, 156 Fifth Avenue, New York 10, N. Y.

No. 183

May 1953



The Rural Church as an Integrating Institution

By Samuel W. Blizzard*

It is an ideal of the Christian faith that the church is an integrating force in the community. The church is looked upon by the believer as a great leveler in our society. One might quote the Apostle Paul when he said, "There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither bond nor free, there is neither male nor female: for ye are all one in Christ Jesus." If one is to follow the biblical orientation, all people are in the church or are invited to participate in the church. The average churchman is usually not willing to recognize that there are differences in church participation that are related to socio-economic status and other factors operating in the rural community.

On the basis of stated beliefs religion ought to be the most unifying force in rural communities. As a matter of record it usually is not. There is some justification for the accusation often leveled at the church that it is a divisive special interest group which destroys the unity of the rural community.

It is my conviction that the church can serve the community by encouraging a spirit of cooperation. Community relations involve the various publics to which the rural church is related in fulfilling its function in the community. Some of these are: its leaders and members, other church leaders and members in the community, nonchurch people, and leaders and members of nonreligious agencies and institutions (agricultural extension, the Grange, lodges, schools, government, etc.). The development of closer relations with her publics may result in increased interest in and support of the church as a community agency.

May we now take a backward look and trace a sketchy picture of the way that the rural church has conducted its community relations during the past century or two. The history of the rural church and its community relations may be divided into three periods. First is the period of dominance. The second is the period of competition and conflict. And third, there is the period of

* An address given at the 16th Annual Rural Leadership Institute held at the University of Kentucky in Lexington, April 15, 1953. Mr. Blizzard is Associate Professor of Sociology and Rural Sociology at Pennsylvania State College.

cooperation and coordination. These three periods of church and community relations in rural America cannot be sharply divided one from the other, rather they overlap at many points. One might even add that one can find proponents of each of these philosophies of church and community relations in rural areas today. One might say that these are points of view about the strategy of the rural church in its community relations rather than specific periods of history.

THE PERIOD OF DOMINANCE

Before the advent of modern rapid transportation and the development of high speed communication lines the church was the center of the community, not only geographically but culturally. The whole life of the community was woven around the church. The community was the church and the church was the community.

As the historian views it, the church parish was small. Rural settlements consisted of a few farmers on the best land and those who served the farmer who lived in the houses at the crossroads. Forests or prairies filled the spaces in between. People lived most of their lives within the settlement surrounding the church. They grew their crops and had the grain ground at the local grist mill. They raised their own animals for milk and meat. Sheep provided meat as well as fiber for cloth. Folks were born and reared, fell in love and married, bore and reared their children, and at the last died and were buried within the sound of the church bell. The minister was in a position of community-wide leadership. People normally sought to satisfy more of their social needs in the church and through the minister then than they seem to now.

There are a number of reasons for this. For one thing, in the days before the revolution in transportation and communication, it was the practice to build churches within convenient distances that could be traveled by horse and wagon. Churches were located largely in areas that were relatively isolated. With these limitations on travel churches tended to serve small neighborhoods. There was little competition from other organizations and interests. Since the church was the dominant institution in the community, people normally looked to the church for community leadership and the satisfaction of their social needs. The minister had to be able to operate within his own church organization. As long as he knew how to manipulate the organizational needs of his own parish, he did not need to be concerned about the community in any special way. As a result, the community relations task was a much different one 100 or 200 years ago when most of our rural churches were founded.

THE PERIOD OF COMPETITION

The period of competition and conflict in rural church community relations developed when the railroad and the telegraph provided new avenues of communication. The development of these inventions changed the American rural scene. More good land was opened up for settlement by pioneering families; the forests in between the settlements were cut away and rafted down streams. Mills and stores and taverns and schools and churches multiplied with the people and with the cleared land; agricultural life expanded.

During this period when America was expanding, denominational leaders thought that they must plant a church of their persuasion in every community across the land. As a result of this denominational empire-building there is

an excessive overchurching in the small rural communities of America.

Then there came a time when agriculture was overexpanded. And the richness of the soil on the hills was leached out and the black soil of the broken plains began to blow away or was, by erosion, carried away to the river. Industrial changes made the water wheels of the local mills obsolete. Farms were abandoned; mud filled up the mill pond; whole villages became ghost towns. Paved roads and fast cars and trucks, newspapers, moving pictures, the radio -- all brought the life of a distant metropolis to the hamlet. People began to move to the city in greater numbers.

Overchurching became exaggerated. One sociologist, in studying this situation, concluded that there are too many struggling little churches in rural communities competing among themselves, hugging their differences, weakening rather than strengthening their program.

Protestantism, as it developed during this period in rural America, was especially prone to conflict. Growing out of this a characteristic pattern of religious behavior in the American rural community has been one in which dissident groups have split off from church groups with which they disagreed. A variety of issues may have lead to these divisions and schisms. It may have been differences in doctrine or creed, or in church policy, or in forms of worship. The issues may have been quite unrelated to religion. In local rural churches, however, sometimes there was no issue at all but simply personality clashes.

When the Country Life Commission, called by President Theodore Roosevelt, met, they found it to be "of the greatest consequence that the people of the open country should learn to work together not only for the purpose of forwarding their economic interest and competing with other men who are organized but also to develop themselves and to establish an active community spirit." Certainly no church has a right to impose itself upon rural society unless it is making a contribution to the enrichment of the human community. To do this the program of the rural church must be community-centered rather than communion-centered. It must be built in terms of the basic spiritual needs of the community. When this is done, churchmen will ask themselves: shall the community serve the church or shall the church serve the community and its people? It is my conviction that the church must serve the community.

Can the church wring its hands in desperation unless the resources of the church are placed at the disposal of the community? Has the church a right to condemn sin unless it can help the redeemed individual live in a redeemed society? The welfare of the total community should be at the heart of the program of the church. As churchmen--ministers and lay people--understand the modern community, the church will cease to be a divisive institution and will become a vehicle of unity and cooperation. The church will once again take its place as one of the service organizations in the community. Certainly the church must sell itself to the community if it expects the community to command and use its services.

THE PERIOD OF COOPERATION

It is my conviction that we are now entering a new period of cooperation in the development of rural church community relations. For one thing we

are developing a new conception of cooperative religion. There are many evidences that we are speeding up cooperation at the top levels of our ecclesiastical structures. We live in the midst of a time of unifying rather than diversifying tendencies in Christianity. About five years ago, H. Paul Douglass said that there are believed to be about 2,500 communities in the United States where local church unions have been effective. This is in addition to those unions which have been consummated on a national scale.

Only as the church is willing to throw herself and all her resources behind every effort for community betterment can the church be saved. A modern parable might be, "He who would build his church must first build his community." Or, to paraphrase a saying of Jesus, "He would save his church must be willing to lose it for Christ's sake."

To develop a spirit of cooperation churchmen need to gain a new respect for other community agencies and institutions. Many of these nonchurch groups have discovered effective techniques for meeting people's needs. The status of the church is enhanced if churchmen use up-to-date methods in their work with people. A sharing of techniques and successes with nonreligious groups in the community would be a good place to begin cooperating. For the church would be at a great advantage to work in and through community organizations to build the religious and moral foundations of rural life.

Some human needs are satisfied by the services of religious groups and some by nonreligious community institutions. One might illustrate how two community institutions may develop cooperative community relations. It is of great importance for the church to be closely related to the school. Because of certain traditions, churches and public schools have not been as closely related to each other as they might be. Each has not fully realized the part that it is playing in the life of the other. In some communities the clergy have criticized school programs at Christmas and Easter. A more fruitful attitude from the point of view of community relations would be to think of these programs as an undergirding of the function of the church in the community. The community-minded minister should welcome any opportunity to cooperate in such a program.

There are signs on the horizon that point toward a fuller realization that the Protestant approach to rural church work is a team approach. The clergy and church lay leaders hold the key to the success of this movement for cooperative rural religion. Local church leaders must have a spirit of working together and a sense of group process. When rural church people learn how to work together, a cooperative approach to church and community relations will be developed. Let the church show the way in developing the spirit of cooperation in the rural community.

* * *
* * *
* * * * *
* * * * *
* * *
* * *
* * *